

Rodríguez's Roaring '20s

Por Carmen Ospina

"I have a hard time writing a completely realistic story," says Antonio Orlando Rodríguez, referring to his just-published novel, [Aprendices de brujo](#). "As soon as I let my guard down, everything, from ghosts to Chinese wizards to wandering souls, pops up in my plots." With three novels, a play, and 14 children's books under his belt, Rodríguez has an unquestionable talent for portraying the fantastic, be it in English or Spanish. *Aprendices*, which Rodríguez wrote in both languages for Rayo, is replete with discouraged phantoms, transmigrating souls, and all kinds of caricatural types. But the Cuban author's real genius lies in the way he weaves these fantastic creations with historical fact.

Rodríguez, who was born in Cuba but lived in Colombia, Costa Rica and, as of 1999, in the United States, masterfully re-creates the dialect, customs, architecture, and artistic and political atmosphere of two very different cities, Havana and Bogotá, during the roaring '20s. Sublime Italian stage legend Eleonora Duse and several real-life poets, politicians, and artists of the time parade through the pages of this erotic tragicomedy, sometimes acquiring fantastic qualities, other times changing history as we know it. *Críticas* spoke to Rodríguez about the process of blending fact and fiction, *la Duse*, his research on the 1920s, and much more.

Italian actress Eleonora Duse is a central character in *Aprendices*. The protagonists, a gay couple, travel all the way from Bogotá to Havana to interview the elusive aging diva, and you weave her monologs with their adventures. What drew you to Eleonora?

In effect, the book revolves around Duse; she is the novel's spinal chord. While I was living in Bogotá, I happened to come across a biography of the diva and found that she had acted in Havana in 1924, a few weeks before her death. "What would happen if two young elegant and wealthy Bogotanian men traveled to Cuba just to try to interview her?" I wondered. This was the origin of the novel. I read various biographies of the actress and the main dramas that she starred in. I investigated the theater of her time and compiled all the articles from Havana newspapers about her brief visit to the island. Then, I put my notes aside for good. I tried to summon Duse, to make her speak through me. I think this worked because now, when I read some of her monologs, I sometimes wonder where they came from.

Duse's voice is very different from that of the main narrator, Lucho Belalcázar; Duse has another spirit, another sensibility. If Lucho is joyful, frivolous, adventurous, a hedonist with no social conscience, Eleonora is a sad and tired woman, beaten up by war and failed loves, and unfulfilled by her artistic achievements in spite of her genius. Lucho and his lover imagine Duse as a goddess, a legend, but her monologs reveal her as a skeptic. She is as dramatic as those

characters created by Ibsen or Michel Sardou that she once brought to stage, but she is also much more complex and human.

A native of Cuba, you lived in Colombia for eight years. Tell us about reproducing the Bogotano psyche and dialect and about the research you conducted to depict Havana and Bogotá during the 1920s.

One of my greatest challenges was to choose a young, upper-class Bogotanian living in the 1920s as the novel's narrator. His voice had to be authentic yet credible. To do this, I read a lot about the life and customs of Bogotá at the time, and I also used my own observations of the character and psychology of Bogotanians. Yes, time has passed since the 1920s and the Colombian capital has changed, but some behavioral features of its inhabitants remain indelible. I did use many refrains and expressions unique to the Bogotá of yesterday, but more than in an "archeology of language," I was interested in capturing the psyche of a Bogotanian dandy and the roaring 1920s as seen through his eyes. The novel also demanded a long and complicated investigation of both capitals, Bogotá and Havana. For months, I read history books, novels, magazines, and newspapers from the 1920s in libraries in Bogotá and Miami. Although *Aprendices* is not a historical novel, the historical background in it is very important. I enjoyed this research immensely: I must have been a library mouse in a past life.

By setting your novel in such drastically different cities as Bogotá and Havana were you looking to juxtapose the Andean and Caribbean ways of life?

In the 1920s, Bogotá and Havana were very different in terms of their geography, architecture, and the idiosyncrasy of their inhabitants. Bogotá was gray, traditional, very religious and introverted; a thick belt of mountains kept it isolated from the rest of the world. Havana, on the other hand, was a modern city full of color and innovation; it was elegant and refined, and its people expressive and unconventional. In the novel, these differences become evident through Lucho. He contemplates Bogotá, his cold and provincial native city, with a mix of boredom and disdain, and falls in love with the ease, distinction, and sensuality of Havana's inhabitants. I had a hard time envisioning this fantastic Havana since the last images I have of the city are of destruction, filth, and vulgarity. I had to think beyond those images and transport myself to a time when, according to writer Dulce María Loynaz, the Cuban capital was "a small Vienna, a miniature Paris."

Your candid narrator is open and flamboyant in his gay expression. What writers inspired you to use this voice and how did this voice influence the storytelling?

Of course, Lucho Belalcázar's language, personality, and tastes have a significant influence on the narrative style of the novel and its composition. He enjoys narrating stories with a lot of detail, making ironic and indiscreet observations, and he also loves to celebrate his culture and has a very peculiar sense of humor. If I had written the book from the perspective of an

omniscient narrator, the story wouldn't have such a gay tone or be as irreverent; it would feel a bit synthetic. Lucho's voice is inspired by the Colombian novelists of the 1920s—most of them forgotten or with little literary merit—and also by the irreverence of Colombian iconoclast José María Vargas Vila, who actually appears as a character in one episode of the novel.

What was it like to take real historical characters (poets, artists, and politicians) and put them into fiction?

This was really fun. They say that the best lies are those that have a bit of truth in them, and I agree. The blend of fiction and history makes the narrative more credible. In this case, I wanted to use my imagination freely but without betraying history. I especially enjoyed recreating the character of Julio Antonio Mella, the young founder of Cuba's Communist Party, who is venerated by Fidel Castro's regime. It was very satisfying to bring him down from this altar, transform him into a sort of gay icon, and poke a bit of fun at him. The challenge in using real characters and events is that it forces you to read a lot, though sometimes you will and then write only a brief paragraph.

You've written kids' books, adult fiction, and works on the history of Latin American children's literature. Who do you consider your contemporaries? What authors or books have inspired you?

I love absurd stories and even caustic ones like those by Cuban author Virgilio Piñera; I identify with his way of narrating and seeing the world. I also enjoy the characters and fascinating situations created by Argentina's Manuel Mujica Laines. I respect Jane Austen for continuing to seduce readers and admire the centuries-old vitality of *The Decameron* and *The Thousand and One Nights*. This list could go on forever and include writers as varied as Petronio and Dostoyevski, Chekhov and Paul Auster, or Kafka and Reinaldo Arenas. In Havana I belonged, along with Daína Chaviano, Chely Lima, and Alberto Serret, to a literary group aimed at cultivating fantasy, the absurd, and science fiction. A long time has passed, but I believe that our works continue to have some points of confluence.

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